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## The Sense Organs and Objects of Taste and Touch

*(Lecture given by master Sheng-yen on the Surangama Sutra  
on January 1, 1987)*

LEVEL  
ONE

I will continue to speak on the senses and their sense objects in the Surangama Sutra. Today we will concentrate on the tongue and its object, taste, and on the body and the sense of touch.

Once again as he has done for the other senses, the Buddha explains to Ananda that taste has no real existence. He uses the example of the butter and cream that Ananda may get occasionally when he is begging. The Buddha shows that the sense of taste does not arise from the tongue, nor from the food that the tongue tastes, nor from the void.

If what the Buddha said is true, how can you tell that food tastes good or bad? Is it your taste that tastes good, or is it the food that tastes good? Nobody would ever say, "My tongue tastes good today." Someone might say that the food is very good, but is the food delicious in and of itself? By itself food is unknowing. Food has no mind, and no idea what taste is or what is delicious. The tongue, too, is tasteless, and by itself does not know what taste is. It is only when there is contact between the tongue and food that there is a sense of taste, a sense of something being delicious or unpleasant.

When I first came to the United States eleven years ago, I gave a talk in which I used the example of a mango as something delicious. But some of my students had never eaten a mango, and they didn't know what I was talking about. I described it as something that is wonderful to the taste — sweet and juicy. But those who have never tasted a mango cannot know what it really tastes like through my description alone. For them the mango really has no taste.

I have said that neither the mango nor the tongue has any taste in and of itself. Where then does taste come from? Could it be that taste comes from emptiness, from nothing? Let's examine this idea. Before mangos existed there was no such thing as a mango taste. Even after mangos came into existence, before anyone took a bite of one, there was still no such thing as mango taste because no one had tasted one. Could it be that the taste simply arrived from emptiness, from nothingness and then turned into something?

This is still not a reasonable assumption. Because if taste came from



emptiness, or the void, we would be able to taste any taste we wanted just by licking space. To further illustrate this point, if there were a particular taste, say saltiness, in the air or in space, that would mean that your whole body lived in that salty environment, like a fish living in the sea. If that were the case, you would be able to taste saltiness on your hand or your cheek – on every part of your body. And we know that this is not true.

The underlying point of this discussion is that every dharma, or phenomenon, arises directly from the coming together of causes and conditions. It is not just taste, but all things that come together as a result of causes and conditions.

There is one condition that we have not spoken of that is necessary for taste to occur. That is spatial relationship – distance and nearness. Food must come into contact with the tongue for there to be taste. If an apple is out of reach, you cannot taste it. It must be brought into contact with the mouth and tongue before you can know its taste.

There is a kind of Chinese bean curd with a very strong flavor that some Chinese really dislike. There are of course those who like it, just as there are those in the West who like bleu cheese and there are others who can't stand it.

There is a theory that foods like this cause cancer, but apparently Chinese are fearless in their pursuit of what they like to eat. The pungency of the foods is not really what you taste. It is really something that you tolerate because of the delicious taste of the food. Do you accept that?

There are many people who are very particular about what they eat. They insist on eating the most delicious, carefully prepared dishes that they can find. They are very demanding in restaurants, and those that can afford one will hire a good chef to do all their cooking. If you can't afford a good chef, you

can become one yourself. In any case, too much concern about what you eat can lead to trouble.

I read two articles whose points were diametrically opposed to one another. The first said that the development of culinary art was the highest criterion of civilization. Therefore the Chinese, who can make a good meal out of almost anything, are the most advanced people on earth. The second article said that the overemphasis that Chinese place on food has been the root cause of their poverty; they spend all of their time preparing food rather than developing their civilization. On the other hand, Americans, the article continued, will eat almost anything, even raw beef and over-cooked vegetables. This frees them to pursue more important goals. Of course there are many people here at the Center who own restaurants, so it may be somewhat extreme to say that mastery of the art of cooking has caused poverty in China.

Practitioners, however, take a different view of food. They see it as medicine, something which allows the body to function properly. Nobody really says, "This pill tastes delicious, I'll have another helping." Nor does anyone say, "That medicine doesn't look particularly appetizing, I'd rather be sick." Restaurants have to advertise the quality and taste of their food. They can't say, "Try our medicine." But practitioners have a different view.

The point of the *Surangama Sutra* here is to help liberate us from our greed for food, our greed for taste. The sutra shows us that from the point of view of Buddhadharma, taste is nothing more than an illusion. It has no true intrinsic existence. Food provides our body with necessary nutrition. That is what we as practitioners should be concerned with. Taste is of no importance.

A few years ago I was invited to a Thanksgiving dinner with an American family. The father was so fond of turkey that he practically ate a whole one by himself. He was so stuffed he could hardly move. In



fact, he had to crawl on the floor because of indigestion and that made him look a little like a turkey. It wasn't that he was really hungry, it was his passion for the taste and the sensation of eating that caused his overindulgence.

There's another story found in the sutra: Shakyamuni Buddha and Ananda once saw a spinning worm in a dish of honey water. Normally, monks do not eat after noon, but honey water was sometimes provided for them after a hard day's labor.

When Buddha looked at the worm, it seemed to be quite content swimming around in the honey water. Buddha asked Ananda if he recognized the worm. Ananda said, "No, it's just a worm." But Buddha said, "You should recognize him, because a long time ago, many kalpas in fact, the two of you were monks practicing together. He was a sramanera, a novice monk, and he was very greedy when it came to honey water. He could never get enough of it. He would drink all of his share at lunch, and he would steal the honey water that belonged to others. As a consequence, he became a worm in honey water, and has remained one for lifetime after lifetime."

I've never seen a worm such as this, but I imagine it's possible for such a creature to survive for long periods in a sweet liquid.

This story shows that even someone who has taken the precepts of a monk can be very greedy and driven by a passion for taste, and this greed can lead to unfortunate circumstances, indeed. There is no mention in the story about whether this worm ever regained a human incarnation, but I think that once he has suffered the consequences of his karmic actions, he will practice once again.

Confucius spoke of a time when you might listen without hearing and when you might eat but be unaware of what you ate. Under what kind of conditions would this occur? This is no problem for an

inanimate object such as a wooden statue, but could it happen to a human being? It can if you are fully concentrated on what you are doing. It might happen that your eyes would be open, but you wouldn't see; your ears would be open, but you wouldn't hear; and you would chew and swallow but be unaware of what you ate.

I read a story about a famous Chinese scientist who won the Nobel Prize some thirty years ago. It seems that when he was a young child, no matter what kind of food his mother gave him, he had no memory of it, because he was so absorbed in his studies.

This unawareness of sense objects could happen to a practitioner who is working with one-minded determination, or it could happen to someone who is just day dreaming.

Now, this question: if a monk, who is not supposed to eat any meat or fish, is practicing very hard with one-mindedness and someone offers him some meat or fish and he takes it without thinking, what would you think? Has he truly eaten meat or fish? A practitioner such as this might have no recollection of what he had eaten at all, and it would be, in fact, as if he had eaten nothing. It would be the person who brought him the food who had really eaten the meat or fish.

If someone disturbed this practitioner right after he had eaten and asked, "What did you eat?" and he could still recall the taste of the meat and feel the sensations in his mouth, throat, and stomach, then the practitioner had, in fact, eaten. Even in this case, his original act was involuntary, not premeditated.

It is true that some vexations stem from the tongue and the sense of taste, but by far the greatest number of vexations arise through the eyes and the ears, and this is something I will talk about another time.

This is not to say that food can't be a powerful



vexation. In Taiwan there is a lay practitioner, a very sincere Buddhist, who comes to our temple. He is a real gourmet. Often, he will look at the food we serve, determine that it's not up to his standards, and simply say, "I have to go now." This has been quite embarrassing to me, him and the cooks in the temple.

I finally said to him, "Why don't you just prepare the food you like at home, bring it to the temple, and eat it here?" But he said, "No, that wouldn't do. Good food must be fresh from the kitchen, hot from the wok. If I brought in food and reheated it, it would lose all of its flavor." I don't know if there's anybody like that here, but you can certainly see how he causes himself a lot of trouble.

But even if you're not as compulsive as this man, I'm sure that many of you, even if you're full, will eat a few more bites of your lunch or dinner. Or maybe you'll just take some food home so you can munch on it later. Do you think you're anything like this? Anybody? Everybody? This is very important.

The next passage in the sutra deals with touch, the sense of contact. The Buddha uses the example of touching your head with your hand. The question is, does touch have any true existence?

There are two kinds of contact, with the self and with another. That is to say, your body touching your own body, or your body touching another's body or another object. The *Surangama Sutra* only mentions the first kind of contact. Nonetheless, the essence of the second kind of contact is also covered.

There are three necessary elements involved in the sense of touch. In the example given in the sutra, there is first the hand, which is touching, and the head, which is being touched. The third element is the space in which the touching can occur. Touch arises through the causes and conditions associated with these three elements.

What is touch, then? Is it a collection of good feelings, good sensations, bad feelings, uncomfortable sensations? If you smash yourself in the head with your fist, that is not the best feeling in the world. But if you massage your head with your hand, that can feel pretty good. Then again there are sadists and masochists, who like to hit or be hit. They might enjoy some things that we would find very unpleasant. Anybody like that here?

Some types of contact with yourself can be very pleasant. Massaging yourself, or picking your ear, or scratching an itch.

Then there are those who don't really like to come into close contact with another. Such people seldom choose to be married. They are quite satisfied to be in contact with themselves.

Some people really like to be touched by others, and this makes them feel good. It depends on the individual and who is doing the touching. You may like being touched by one person but not by another.

In Taiwan there was a woman who used to bring her child to the temple. I would always touch his head and give him a piece of candy. The child would recognize me and would seem to be quite happy. Every time he came to the temple, I would touch him and give him candy. But there was a monk, one of my disciples, who also tried to touch the child's head, but the child would get upset and start to cry. Why did the child like one person's hand and not another's?

Adults are like this, too. You may be lightly touched by someone you like, and this may bring you a feeling of joy or contentment. But someone you hate may bring up feelings of revulsion if he or she is even ten feet away from you. Most of you have probably had experiences like these. But if you understand the *Surangama Sutra*, you can respond in the same way



as the practitioner we mentioned before, who can eat and be unaware of what he is eating. You will not have so much of a psychological response to touch. You will not react with like or dislike when someone touches you or you touch yourself.

I read a book about acupressure the other day and it mentioned the beneficial effects this procedure can have. Done on a regular basis, it helps promote good physical health and improves the feeling of well being. But to be done correctly acupressure has to hurt. It is not quite the same thing as massage. It is meant to treat physiological problems. Its pleasantness or unpleasantness is not the question; it is therapeutic. The practice of acupressure has its origin in Taoist training, for it involves the flow of energy in the body. I teach some exercises that incorporate these principles.

So you see, I am not against contact, as I am not against food or the sensation of taste. These are necessary parts of life. But the point is that we should not be attached to these sensations, otherwise our vexations will be numerous.

If you are attached to a particular kind of sensation, this can lead to a variety of difficulties. Imagine someone who will only allow one type of fabric to touch his or her skin, and will wear nothing else. Such a person will often be inconvenienced.

There are different kinds of contact and feelings: there is fine, rough, smooth, hard, soft, hot and cold. Most people prefer the soft, the smooth, the fine, and the warm. How about the opposite — what is hard, rough, coarse, and cold? Many of you detest such sensations.

Sometimes what may seem to be good or comfortable is deceptive. Many of you like soft beds that your body can really sink into. But what do you think this does to your body? If you are used to only what

is warm and comfortable, what happens when things get rough? If you're exposed to cold conditions, chances are you will catch a cold immediately. We speak of a flower that grows in a greenhouse as something that will not be able to weather harsh conditions.

There is a story of a man who grew up to become a high ranking officer even though he came from a poor background and an undistinguished family. When he became rich, he travelled only in a sedan chair carried by twelve people which had its own firepot to keep him warm. One day he heard the men who were carrying him say that it was very cold outside. Since he had a firepot next to him, he didn't believe them, so he stuck his hand outside into the air. Just that was enough to give him a cold, and he went home and later died of pneumonia. The people carrying him were used to the cold so nothing happened to them.

Serious practitioners should always train themselves to adapt to harsh conditions and inhospitable environments. It is for this reason that many of them live in mountain caves. What are their beds made of? Rock. If you slept on rocks for one night, your body would ache all over. Even we should train ourselves to endure rough conditions. This will help us to maintain a healthy body and reduce our vexations. But if we find ourselves in a comfortable environment, we should accept it. And if we find ourselves in difficult circumstances, that should be fine, too.

Nevertheless, there have been times when I found it difficult to enjoy comfort. I lived in the mountains when I was in Japan, but once I visited an important guest in a hotel. The room was warm and the bed was soft. I opened the windows and slept on the floor. I found even the rug too thick for my liking. When the attendants saw the blankets on the floor, they thought that someone else had stayed in the room.



But in Buddhadharma there's no conception that someone has such poor karma that he can't enjoy what he has no matter how little or how much that is. But I guess that I wasn't born to enjoy comfort.

When people come to the Center, they sometimes ask where are all the beds for the people who stay here. I tell them the floor is our bed. There was even a woman who came to the Center to go on retreat, but the idea that there were no beds may have been too much for her. She never came back.

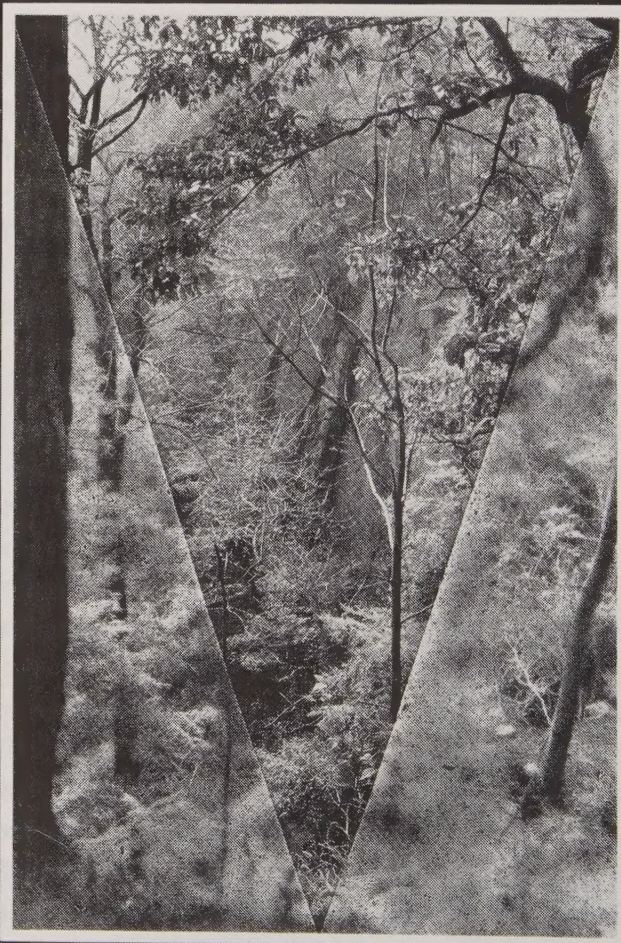
I have spoken of eleven of the twelve entries to date, that is, the six sense organs and the six kinds of sense objects. I will speak about the twelfth one when I come back from Taiwan. You are all welcome to come back for that.

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### New Book

The Center just published Master Sheng-yen's sixth Ch'an book in English is out now. "*The Sword of Wisdom*." This book contains a penetrating commentary on the *Song of Enlightenment*. In this book, compiled from a series of lectures delivered during intensive meditation retreats, Master Sheng-yen gives valuable advice and guidance to those who are practicing Ch'an meditation.

## *The Sword of Wisdom*



*Ch'an Master Sheng-yen*



## News Items

Master Jen Chun will give Sunday lectures on *Buddha Speaks The Adornment of Bodhi Mind Sutra* on Feb. 3, 24, March 3 and 24.

Professor Li will also give talks on various topics on Feb. 10, March 10 and 17.

The Ch'an Center is happy to announce an extra group sitting and we have added another one-day retreat per month. Now the group sitting are on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday from 7:30 to 9:00 pm.

## Retreat Dates

The schedules for coming-up one-day sitting meditation are on Saturday March 2 and 16 from 8:00 am to 9:00 pm. There is a \$10.00 fee for members and a \$15.00 fee for non-members.

The schedule for three-day retreat is from March 22nd, 8:00 am to March 24th 8:00 pm. The donation for the retreat is \$45.00 for non-members and \$30.00 for members.

The seven-day retreats' schedules are as follows:

May 24th to June 1st, 1991

June 28th to July 5th, 1991

November 29th to December 6th, 1991

December 25th to January 1st, 1992

The donation for each retreat is \$200.00 for non-members and \$100.00 for members. Applications are accepted three months prior to the retreats.

We are now accepting application for the three-day retreat. If you wish to join us in the one-day, three-day, or seven-day retreats, please contact us at Ch'an Center.

We are greatly saddened by the death of Mr. Wilson Chow on the 20th. He had been ill with cancer but he was able to maintain a calm mind until the end.

He was a dedicated supporter of the Center. Last year he donated more than 100 of his paintings and calligraphy to the Center for a fund-raising exhibition. Even on his sickbed he had planned for an exhibition in Taiwan to support the center. We are grateful for his contribution and we extend our sincerest sympathy to his family. We will miss him.



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